

Chapter 14

Red Fire

Brian sighed as he made his way back into the room he shared with his wife. He still thought that weird, considering they hadn't gone before a priest or judge, but there hadn't been any to survive into this new century. He wasn't sure if that was a bad thing or a good thing. Regardless, he didn't complain.

Rachel appeared to him already asleep, standing on her four legs as her swollen belly hung heavy with their child.

Their child; the mere thought of it was enough to give him goosebumps.

He checked that her human torso, lying on her sleeping desk with a pillow under her head, was stable and comfortable. Then he went to his desk and pulled out a book he'd borrowed from the library. Tired as he was, he didn't feel sleepy and thought that it might help him relax. He looked at the title: *White Fang*, by Jack L. Chalker. He'd never read it before, but the two fighting wolves on the cover in front of a bundled man in what appeared to be Alaska promised it would be interesting, at least.

He settled onto the pallet to read, becoming absorbed in the story of the wild wolf-pup and how he overcame constant adversity in the wilds of Alaska. There were plenty of strange and fantastic characters that came and went, from kind trappers and Indian natives to hellish brutes who enjoyed dog fighting, to innocent children.

Absorbed as he was in the story, he still felt himself drift into a torpid state, neither asleep nor awake.

It seemed to him that he stood in his familiar forge works, the fires banked but still aglow, casting a reddish light while in his mind the story continued, the words echoing somehow.

Make me. They seemed to whisper. *I am ready. Make me.*

How do I do that? He asked, feeling unnaturally calm.

You know how, the voice whispered.

On his anvil, he saw a shrouded shape. With trembling fingers, he gently pulled aside the cloth to reveal a sword unlike any he'd ever seen before.

Upon its metal blade there were carved deep runes of a kind he'd never encountered, but spelled its name plainly: *White Fang*, Guardian of the West. Upon its hilt were fashioned three wolves running, while a fourth wolf snarled from the pommel. All four had deep-set, ruby eyes, and silver teeth, each carved so delicately and fine that every hair could almost be counted, if it ever stopped moving.

Never had Brian beheld a finer blade; dropping to his knees he bowed before it.

Make me, Blacksmith, for I am to be made by you, it seemed to say.

And just like that Brian found himself released from his

fever dream, alive and freshened with newfound energy.

Picking himself up, he left the book on his desk and slipped out the door, taking care not to disturb his wife in her desperately needed slumber.

Alone in the halls--it was well after curfew--he hurried down the long corridors to the dwarf furnaces. There he found a late crew still making swords for the Rangers and extra arrow-heads. They looked up at his approach, and their foreman, Shyla's mother.

"And what are you doing back?" she asked shortly, as he grabbed an apron.

"I know what I must do." He told her.

She blinked, taken aback. "No, you don't." She rallied. "You need to sleep. You've already put in a double shift today, and that was on top of a busy morning."

"Amy, I need your help." He said. "Pull the bellows for me, nice and steady. If you cannot do it, I'll find someone else that can."

She sniffed, insulted, but seeing there wasn't budging him in this strange mood, she began pumping the bellows in slow, steady rhythm on one of the forges bringing the forge to full blast.

Brian went to the stockpile to select the pieces he would need, and then bound them in wire to hold them together until they'd melted. Placing his best steel in the fire he smelted it and started fashioning. Thrice and thrice again he folded the bar, itself made of fifty layers of flat iron and carbon. Under the heavy strokes of his hammer, the blade took shape. Constantly he placed it back in the forge, then pulled out to beat on it while sparks soared nearly to the ceiling of the vast cavern, and then put it back in.

Amy gave over the bellows to a young man who'd answered her summons. She took the handle of the stock from Brian and began turning it under his direction, placing it in the furnace and then on the anvil.

Ding! Ring-Ding! Ding-Ring! His hammer stroke seemed to shake the mountain to its roots. The others stopped work to watch, caught up in the momentous effort taking place.

For long hours Brian and his two assistants beat the blade into shape. Using a special chisel, he carved the runes he'd seen in his vision onto the blade before laying it aside. Turning his attention to the cross guard, he repeated the shaping process. When he deemed the shape was right, he took out a small silver hammer from the dwarf tools and proceeded to form the wolves upon the metal. For the main hilt, he brought forth a sanded piece of wood and wrapped it carefully in leather, securing it tightly under the pommel. Placing the blade in a vice with the tang up, he raised the hilt up and with a roar rammed it home. Sealing the piece with glue, he cleaned, sharpened, and polished the blade. Holding it aloft he cried to

his people: "White Fang is Born! Let the world know, White Fang is born again!"

A mighty cheer came from the assembled, the noise echoing outside the forge and down the long passages of the mountain.

< < < < > > > >